



Monitoring and Evaluation Tools for Counterterrorism Program Effectiveness

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Introduction

Over the last decade counterterrorism experts working in or outside of government have learned a valuable lesson: going after terrorists is necessary but not sufficient. Programmes to prevent people from becoming terrorists in the first place are also vital, but their effects are not well understood. Measuring effectiveness has often been framed in one of two distinct ways. The first is specifically quantitative, such as numbers of insurgents and civilians killed. The second is a qualitative interpretation of those outcomes, such as the reputational costs or values communicated when civilians are inadvertently killed. Of course, numbers rarely tell the whole story, and interpretations of meaning are vulnerable to distortion. This brief explores the critical question of how to evaluate preventive approaches to counterterrorism, ensure value for money, and ensure that such approaches receive the resources and attention they deserve.

The Challenge of Measuring Effectiveness

The example of armed counterterrorism is instructive in understanding the challenge of determining the effectiveness of counterterrorism programming and operations. Operations of this kind are monitored for their immediate degrading impact on terrorist networks' operational capability, but what systemic evaluation has been done of their psychological and attitudinal

impact on the communities affected? There remains a tension between the immediate tactical gains of such strikes and the longer-term effects of potentially radicalizing the wider communities hosting those targeted. In Somalia in 2005 and 2006, for example, U.S. military strikes were carried out against fighters of the Union of Islamic Courts, killing some but ultimately inspiring a destabilizing backlash, fuelling support for violent Islamist groups and antiforeign sentiment.¹

Planning against such unwanted outcomes is important for military-focused counterterrorism operations, but also as part of preventive, human security-oriented initiatives as well. There is a growing understanding that only by learning about why communities passively or actively host violent extremists can we learn how to deny those networks their base of support. Recent policy shifts toward preventive solutions rather than symptomatic reactions have highlighted the need to redesign counterterrorism programs to include systems to monitor and evaluate longer-term attitudinal impact.

In this policy brief, we explore and explain three monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tool kits that are in common use among the research and development communities, which may be of use in future counterterrorism programs.

The first tool kit consists of formal evaluation questions. These are standard, predefined

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arrays of questions about the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, and impact of programs. In other words, these questions help guide researchers through the process of evaluation.

The second tool kit consists of the applied methods that field researchers use in their interactions with subject communities to find answers to their questions. These include but are not limited to techniques such as interviews, focus groups, perception surveys, and opinion polling.

The third tool kit consists of new technologies that enable and amplify the first two. Utilizing these three tool kits enhances the potential to apply M&E systems to the counterterrorism sector, enabling new research approaches to help understand the problem of communities that host extremist networks.

Asking the Right Questions

Counterterrorism efforts are often implemented in fragile and conflict-affected societies where straightforward causal connections among activities, outcomes, and ultimately impact are difficult to identify and measure. The complexity of the environment and sensitivity of the subject matter have an impact on the potential to collect and interpret relevant data.

M&E tools must therefore be carefully calibrated to the counterterrorism context. A more flexible and context-sensitive approach to assessing effectiveness, outcome, and impact is required in order to enable continuous adjustment and improvement of program implementation, thereby ensuring positive impacts and value-for-money.

In such fragile environments, the development sector has evolved various systems and tools to monitor and evaluate intervention impacts on

complex and often intangible phenomena such as attitudes toward domestic violence, maternal health-seeking behaviors, or drivers of local conflict. For purposes of brevity and clarity, we will highlight only one of these here, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Quality Standards for Development Evaluation, known more colloquially as the DAC Standards, endorsed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.²

The DAC Standards revolve around five key criteria: relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. There are many approaches to evaluation, but generally they look at the links among planning, implementation, and final outcomes. Evaluations based on the DAC Standards look at the relationship among overall aim, context, and implemented activities and how these lead to outcomes that ultimately may have positive impact. In development projects, evaluation questions are related directly to the five key criteria. For example, in evaluating the first criteria—relevance—questions would be as follows:

- Does the intervention relate in a meaningful way to local factors?
- Are the assumptions on which the activity is based logical and sensible to the context?
- Are outputs consistent with project objectives?

Ongoing monitoring through on-the-ground collection of relevant data enables the assessment over time of outcomes and impact. Interaction with the communities is an unavoidable, indispensable part of this process. Who is asking the questions is as important as what questions are being asked, and the more effort that is put into training local community members in research methodologies, the higher the quality of data accrued.

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Only by understanding community attitudes toward extremism prior to, during, and after intervention can a judgment be made that a counterterrorism program has had a positive effect. Midterm review of data and continuous assessment also enable organizations to adjust their activities as appropriate, essentially fine-tuning what they do and how they implement in order to avoid negative unintended outcomes. This is key to lessons-learned processes and has worked especially well in cases where M&E efforts have been integrated into program implementation from the onset.

Many development organizations use Theory of Change as a model for understanding the logic of an intervention, causation and impact, and implementation improvement. The first step in this process is to establish a clear understanding of the aim of the intervention. Translated to the counterterrorism sector, we might articulate this as programs or initiatives aimed at reducing the risk of individuals turning to violent extremism in order to avoid targeting already-radicalized individuals, thereby risking the radicalization of the wider community. In order to achieve this aim, it is necessary to understand the prior perceptions and attitudes of individuals and the communities they comprise, record evidence of perceived injustice or deprivation that may lead to radicalization, and address the causes.

Selecting the Right Methods

Selecting appropriate methods to implement M&E systems revolves around asking the right people the right questions in order to understand their social, political, and ideological perceptions. This wider and more gradual approach to observing and relating to communities allows approaches over time to understanding relevant but sensitive phenomena such as attitudes toward security provision, levels of extremism, and notions of conflict. This provides the baseline needed

then to measure the effects of preventive initiatives. Such questioning should occur throughout the program implementation process in order to regularly adjust initiatives to realities on the ground, remaining sensitive to real and potential contextual changes that may influence the effectiveness and ultimate impact of implementation. Early-stage recognition and reduction of the potential for negative unintended consequences is critical, as is capturing lessons learned that will help to inform future interventions.

This process is complex. It relies on corroboration, triangulation, and close reading of sources, methods, and data in order to capture finer points of meaning and frequently elusive social and cultural nuance. Best practice in M&E suggests that optimal research design for such work uses mixed methods, drawing on quantitative and qualitative approaches. Indeed, some of the most influential work on violent conflict in recent years has made excellent use of mixed methods, sparking widespread interest in the social sciences and in applied field research.³ Overall, mixed methods can lead to enhanced understanding of program aims, plans, actual implementation, outcome, and ultimately impact. Yet, there is no single formula for this, and too rigid a commitment to any one approach or method (or set of methods) will inevitably lead to inappropriate research design.⁴

New Technologies

One of the more interesting technological developments over the last two decades has been the emergence of new means for managing and communicating information. Data is recorded and analyzed in spreadsheets, results are communicated via mobile devices or e-mail. Research without such tools is an onerous and unforgiving task. Context, however, as illustrated in the military counterterrorism example at the beginning of

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this policy brief, is equally important. Under conditions of social and political stress, for example, more advanced tools, from DNA kits to biometric sensors, can and have become sources of contention, playing prominent roles in military and policing operations, intelligence gathering, and surveillance.

This can be an obvious problem for evaluators, who always need to remain cognizant of how they and their implements are perceived by their subjects. The social impact of researchers' tools can have an adverse effect on data collection and ultimately on the findings of a study. In conflict-affected and politically contentious research environments, their use might even become impractical or counterproductive. Of course, it is not the tools themselves, but rather who uses them, how they are used, and the purposes for which they are used that set the tone for any evaluation. Still, some research-enabling technologies are distracting and invasive, adding a dimension to field research that requires special consideration. As a result, asking the right questions and remaining sensitive to such issues is crucial.

Not all research-enabling technologies are observable components of the evaluation process. Perhaps the most significant innovations are those that equip individuals and teams of researchers with the ability to develop and subsequently extract meaning from large, complex data sets. Distributed teams of field researchers, for example, can now coordinate simultaneous efforts at multiple sites, collect several forms of data quickly and in parallel using very simple handheld devices, and feed their results wirelessly to cloud-based file servers. Desk analysts can subsequently collate results, apply a variety of analytical methods and techniques to collected data, and collate a portfolio of spatial, ethnographic, and content analysis using geographic information software, social

network analysis, and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software.

In the past, the costs and expertise associated with such complexity would have been prohibitive. Now, it is not only possible, but also practical. These methods and techniques are not necessarily new; many of them have been used extensively. Rather, our argument is that new technologies can facilitate more-effective use of systematic monitoring and evaluation. This reduces the challenges associated with topics previously considered too esoteric or culturally impenetrable, locations considered too remote, or populations considered too difficult to access. This is the promise of applying mixed methods using new technologies in challenging research settings.

The peril is that counterterrorism implementers, newly equipped with the latest gadgets, might underestimate the costs associated with some technologies⁵, forget to question their own assumptions about their work, or fail to evaluate the longer-term impacts of their interventions. Technology is not a substitute for thoughtful evaluation of activity, but a carefully deployed addition.

Monitoring and Evaluating Interventions

Asking the right questions has become increasingly important to the effective conduct of various types of interventions. Development-oriented M&E systems have been used in peace-building and security-sector reform programs, and lessons can be learned from looking at how these sectors have approached impact assessment.

The lessons of stabilization operations are especially illustrative. Separate studies conducted by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and the RAND

Corporation concurred that stabilization operations would benefit from M&E.⁶ RAND found that the complex structures and aims of stabilization interventions are somewhat at odds with traditional M&E but that Theory of Change principles would ensure sufficient versatility and allow for the adaptation of M&E to the realities of stabilization. Stabilization, according to their definition, is “essentially the process or collection of activities which are aimed at reducing the risk of normal political processes becoming violent” through changes in perception and behavior.⁷

Adopting M&E for evaluating counterterrorism programs is likely to be similarly complex but equally beneficial. The DAC standards and the questions asked can be applied to any process. Consider the earlier example of evaluation questions used in development projects. An evaluation of the relevance of a counterterrorism program might frame them with little or no change in wording. Despite vast differences between development and counterterrorism, the simple process of questioning according to the five DAC criteria can help shape and guide program effectiveness.

In the past, whole-of-government approaches to countering terrorism have traditionally relegated nonmilitary functions to adjunct roles in support of security operations and armed intervention. Yet, thinking and priorities have clearly shifted over the years to incorporate a more evaluative approach to longer-term aims and priorities. In this light, recent approaches to understanding radicalization and countering violent extremism through a focus on community-level prevention are encouraging. The White House’s recently issued policy on countering violent extremism, for example, is one such approach in which inclusion of M&E systems could contribute to overall program effectiveness.⁸

Conclusion

Operations that focus on the detention or killing of terrorists and the degradation of terrorist networks dominated the debate on counterterrorism for the last decade. Such operations are measured in a conventional sense by counting the numbers killed or captured, but what is the impact on the communities they affect? The M&E approaches discussed in this brief can help understand the root causes of violent extremism or help reduce in real terms the number of individuals radicalized to the point where they are prepared to use violence to promote their aims.

Policies that focus on symptoms rather than causes are belied by the jurisdictional complexity of extremism and contradicted by long-standing policy rhetoric about whole-of-government strategies. In reality, counterterrorism is a much larger rubric of activities, including the significant efforts in recent years to tackle the causes of violent extremism through the development of community-based policing, counterradicalization programs and community outreach initiatives.

Such measures aim at reduction and prevention of identified enabling factors such as community support, legitimating ideologies, and perceived injustices and deprivations. As such, they can tackle causes of extremism as well as its effects and accordingly should be given priority in terms of budgeting and political support. The challenge is that the effects are much more difficult to measure and evaluate. For this reason, it is necessary to look beyond the security sector itself for the tools needed.

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The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, its staff, or advisory council.

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Notes

¹ David Kilcullen and Andrew Macdonald Exum, "Death From Above, Outrage From Below," *New York Times*, 16 May 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/17/opinion/17exum.html>.

² For more background and explanation of the DAC Standards, see http://www.oecd.org/departement/0,2688,en_2649_33721_1_1_1_1_1,00.html.

³ See Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴ Yet, perception surveys of individuals and groups—understanding how implemented programs affect perceptions—are particularly useful for assessing counterterrorism program effectiveness.

⁵ Phone polling, for example, has the advantage of reduced cost but is generally considered less reliable than other techniques, because of the limited opportunity to build rapport with respondents and sampling biases associated with phone ownership, among other reasons.

⁶ Christian van Stolk et al., *Monitoring and Evaluation in Stabilisation Interventions: Reviewing the State of the Art and Suggesting Ways Forward*, RAND Corp., 2011, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2011/RAND_TR962.pdf; Cedric de Coning and Paul Romita, *Monitoring and Evaluation of Peace Operations*, International Peace Institute, November 2009, http://www.ipacademy.org/media/pdf/publications/ipi_rpt_m_and_e_of_peace_ops_epub.pdf.

⁷ Van Stolk et al., *Monitoring and Evaluation in Stabilisation Interventions*, p. ix.

⁸ Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States," 3 August 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/03/empowering-local-partners-prevent-violent-extremism-united-states>.